

Forest Plan Revision Issues – January 2009

Wilderness/Roadless/Backcountry Issue

Addressing the need or demand for Wilderness is difficult. Information from recreation user surveys indicates that some of our existing Wilderness areas are overcrowded and that user interactions are at an inappropriately high level. Surveys indicate a large number of people with a desire for more Wilderness on the forest and that a high percentage of people currently using the Forest use Wilderness areas. Many areas where we see high interactions and overuse in Wilderness areas are at sites (such as the falls at St. Marys) where the draw is a feature not necessarily related to Wilderness. In surveys it is difficult to establish if the desire is for remote recreation or for designated Wilderness. The difference between designated Wilderness and remote backcountry areas is not always clear to forest users. The Forest provides many areas for remote backcountry recreation and opportunities for solitude. Some of the best areas to experience this setting are not in designated Wilderness.

The GW has the highest number of acres of Inventoried Roadless Areas in the east. Wilderness makes up 4% of the GW and this is less than the average in Region 8 or Region 9. Wilderness recommendations should not be based just on a need to identify a certain number of areas or acres, but should address opportunities to add areas of significance to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

IDT discussions had identified the following areas as being the best areas to consider for recommendation as Wilderness: Beech Lick Knob, Ramseys Draft Addition (east side), Little River, Rich Hole Addition, St. Mary's (west), Crawford Knob, the Oak knob-Hone Quarry/Gum Run/High Knob complex, Jerkentight, and Laurel Fork (though several people had significant concerns about Laurel Fork as wilderness).

Beech Lick is a large area with topography that provided good opportunities for remoteness (has a large unbroken area of Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized setting). There are few conflicts with other trail users (biking, horse use, high use hiking), though the Great Eastern Trail is proposed to go through the area. It is an area that is currently suitable for wildlife habitat and timber management. Many of the other areas under consideration are currently in remote backcountry or special management areas.

The west side of Ramseys Draft Addition is almost entirely underlain by privately owned minerals, so that area is not considered to be a good area to recommend. The east side of the Addition could add substantial acreage to an existing Wilderness. The eastern boundary of the area needs to be adjusted in consideration of existing trail use, existing wildlife habitat/timber management and possible relocation of the North River road to remove it from the floodplain.

Little River is the largest area in the inventory and provides great opportunities for remoteness. Out of all of the areas, its size offers the best opportunity for natural processes to operate.

However, the area also provides some excellent opportunities for mountain biking and many trails in the area are actively used by bikers. The area is also very popular with bear hunters. A compromise proposal has been made by the Friends of Shenandoah Mountain to just recommend designation of a portion of the Little River area as Wilderness. There are some private minerals in the eastern portion of the area. The Rockingham and Augusta County Boards of Supervisors have both passed resolutions against Wilderness designation. We would like to hear more from the public on identifying boundaries for this area.

The Rich Hole Addition offers the opportunity to expand the acreage of a small existing Wilderness and almost connect the Rich Hole Wilderness to the Rough Mountain Wilderness. There are management concerns about the southern portion of the area that has an extensive boundary with private land. The northern section along Forest Road 129 has been actively managed.

Crawford Mountain is a fairly large area with opportunities for remoteness, but these opportunities are limited to some degree since the area is one mountain rather than a watershed. It has few conflicts with other recreation users. Jerkentight is another relatively large block, but is a long block along a ridge and does have an important bike (and horse?) trail along the ridge.

There are 3 additions to St. Marys. The small western addition is recommended. While the southern addition was recommended in the current plan, Congress has not designated it in the 2000 Wilderness Bill (when The Priest and Three Ridges Wilderness were designated) and it is not included in the current Wilderness bill before Congress for areas on the Jefferson National Forest. Much of the boundary of this addition adjoins private land which has resulted in a desire to leave this Addition in a remote backcountry setting. The northern Addition is part of the Kelley Mountain Special Biological Area. Fire is an important part of the ecology of the Kelley Mountain area and the ability to use fire would be much greater if the area is not wilderness.

The Oak Knob-Hone Quarry, Gum Run, High Knob areas are the other relatively large blocks that could provide opportunities for remoteness. Like Little River, these areas contain a number of highly used bike trails and the area is heavily used by bear hunters. About half of the High Knob area is in West Virginia and the Division Natural Resources has strong reservations about wilderness designation due to the limitations on habitat management.

Laurel Fork has many wilderness qualities. It has high values for remoteness within the area and the area itself is remote. It has unique biologic resources for Virginia in a scenic setting. The area has been managed to protect these values and people seem to be happy with the current condition of the area. It has been considered for wilderness many times in the past and there has been very little active management in the area. Due to the high level of biological diversity, there is likely a need to do some type of active management for several of the species. This concern may be exasperated by global climate change. These are species with affinities to more

northern climates and may be some of the first to be affected by increasing temperature changes. We are reluctant to forgo management opportunities by designating the area as a wilderness.

Recommendation:

The most likely areas that we would recommend are: Ramseys Draft Addition (about 5,000 acres on the east side only with boundary adjustments), Little River (about 10,000 – 25,000 acres with boundaries to be determined), Rich Hole Addition (about 5,000 acres leaving off the southern portion with the extensive private land boundary and the northern section along Forest Road 129), and St. Marys Addition – West (about 300 acres). These areas expand existing wilderness areas or have the opportunity to make a substantial additional wilderness. One major concern about the Ramseys Draft and Little River areas is the opposition of the county boards of supervisors.

Management of the Inventoried Roadless Areas on the Forest has been a source of contention since the 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule rulemaking began. Most (87%) of the IRA's are identified as unsuitable for timber production and have restrictions on timber harvest. Many comments on the current revision expressed a desire to manage the 1993 Inventoried Roadless Areas in the manner prescribed in the 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule. Part of the emphasis of the 2001 Rule was to avoid the costs and resource impacts of constructing roads into backcountry, roadless areas. Portions of several of GW Inventoried Roadless Areas adjoin high quality roads and were assigned to management areas that continued the timber and wildlife habitat emphasis that had long been practiced on the areas. We have also received a lot of comments expressing a desire to emphasize management in the vicinity of existing roads and reduce, or avoid, management of areas that would require road construction. In addition, with the recent increase in gypsy moth defoliation, a concern about the ability to salvage timber along the roads is again a concern. To respond to these concerns we propose the following management of the existing Inventoried Roadless Areas that are not recommended for wilderness.

The Inventoried Roadless Areas (except for the portions described in item 1) would be identified as remote backcountry areas (in addition to the other remote backcountry areas). The remote backcountry areas would have desired conditions, suitable uses and guidelines that would generally prohibit road construction and timber harvest. In addition, salvage and firewood gathering from interior and perimeter roads can occur using ground based methods without additional road construction. Landings can be provided adjacent to existing roads.

1. The area within ½ mile of existing roads along or in the roadless area that are currently suitable for timber harvest, can continue to be managed using timber harvest. Within this area temporary roads can be constructed for the harvest activities. No permanent road construction would be allowed. This applies to the following areas and totals about 8,000 acres): Crawford Mountain (Forest Roads 300, 1269, 388), Elliott Knob (Forest Roads

1591 and 383), Little River (Forest Road 95A), Mt. Pleasant-Outside of the NSA (Forest Roads 1167, 48 and 520), Jerkentight (Forest Roads 399B and 393), Dolly Anne (Forest Road 125), Little Alleghany (Forest Road 35), Dry River (Forest Road 68), Oak Knob (Forest Road 225), and Mill Mountain (Forest Roads 129 and 362).

With this management in place, the major remote areas on the forest would be managed for their remote, backcountry resources. In the inventory of Potential Wilderness Areas, many of the Inventoried Roadless Areas were expanded into lands that are currently managed for wildlife habitat and timber management. In addition, 12 new areas were identified that are also currently assigned to active management. We recommend that these areas remain in active management similar to that in the current Plan.

Emphasis was placed on managing the Inventoried Roadless Areas as backcountry (as opposed to the Potential Wilderness Areas) for the following reasons:

- a) In general these areas represent the more remote areas of the forest;
- b) These areas have generally had little active management in the past 15 years;
- c) There has been a high level of public input on the desire for limited management of the Inventoried Roadless Areas;
- d) Much of the area in the Potential Wilderness Areas that are extensions of the IRAs is between old IRA boundaries and existing roads. These areas are readily accessible and available for management activities without additional permanent road construction;
- e) Many of the Potential Wilderness Areas (not associated with old IRAs) are long and skinny and surrounded by roads. As such, they are well roaded and available for management activities without additional permanent road construction; and
- f) Much of the area in the Potential Wilderness Areas (outside the IRAs) is in areas that are suitable for timber production and has been actively managed within the past 15 years.

National Scenic Areas (NSA)

Several of the compromise options that have been suggested by the public have involved recommendations for National Scenic Areas. These are generally proposed when a wilderness candidate has existing mountain bike use. This is usually explained as a compromise that allows the bike use while providing “permanent protection” for the area. National Scenic Area designations are made by Congress. We are not recommending any NSA designations, but many of the areas in question are identified as backcountry recreation areas or special biologic areas which would result in management very similar to a NSA.. We have not heard of any areas that have scenic characteristics that rise substantially above those of the rest of the Forest. We do not see any advantage to “permanent protection.” The area remains designated as National Forest. The ability to examine how the area should be managed on a 10-15 year basis seems reasonable.

OHV Roads

CER Recommendation: No Change needed. The planning effort produced a total of 157 miles of featured open roads allocated to OHV use and identified an additional 60 miles of roads suitable, at least seasonally, for such use. The existing allocated OHV road network is largely intact. There has been some repair on a few roads over the past 15 years to correct erosion problems contributing to watershed impacts. A review of our roads database indicates there are currently a total of 244 miles of roads having an objective Maintenance Level of 2 – High Clearance.

IDT has many concerns about soil/water/fishery impacts of OHV roads and on the funding availability to expand opportunities.

Recommendation:

The CER recommendation remains. While some members of the public requested expansion of the OHV road system, we believe that it is best not to add an objective for more OHV roads. The existing use and illegal use of our roads may indicate a need for more roads. However, we have concerns about soil and water protection, our ability to maintain an expanded system, and the potential for additional illegal vehicle use so we are not recommending any increase. There may be opportunities to improve the existing networks, but with no net increase in miles of road.

Roads

CER Recommendation: C-1. Delete road construction as an objective of the Plan. Road construction objective was not met. Road construction is a function of a project's purpose. Road management across the George Washington NF has followed the direction in the 1993 Revised Plan with no real conflicts or detours from guidelines. The review and evaluation of new information, including the Roads Analysis Report for the GWNF completed in 2003, and the Revised Jefferson NF Plan lead to the recommendation there is nothing new to incorporate into the Revised GW Plan.

Several comments have been made that we need to identify the minimum road system needed on the forest per the roads analysis regulations.

Recommendation:

The current road system generally represents the minimum road system needed. There will likely be needs for some additional road construction, but it will be limited. We will have an objective for decommissioning of roads (including both authorized and unauthorized roads). This objective will be in the range of 10-15 miles per decade.

Road Density

CER Recommendation: C-5. Remove the existing standards (for road density) 14-7 and 15-5 and create guideline that roads should be closed during nesting and brooding rearing seasons and then can be opened during fall hunting seasons.

Public expressed a desire for retaining road density guides, especially in bear areas.

IDT does not believe that we need road density guidelines for bear due to the healthy population on the GW and the area set aside for backcountry and wilderness, but we want to check back with the state game agencies. In addition, we have built very few miles of open roads in the past 15 years. An idea to consider is to have a goal/objective of no additional miles of open roads.

Recommendation:

We do not believe that we need road density guidelines in the Plan, though we want to consult further with the State game agencies. We do expect that the current mileage of open roads on the Forest will remain at about the current level.

Wind

CER Recommendation: C-1 Identify the Forest as generally suitable for locating wind energy development (commercial wind farms) outside of the following special areas: Wilderness or wilderness study areas; special botanical, zoological, geological, or research natural areas; Shenandoah Mountain Crest (Cow Knob Salamander Habitat); both Indiana Bat protection areas; Appalachian Trail corridor; remote backcountry areas; Mt. Pleasant National Recreation Area; and Big Schloss, Laurel Fork, and Little River Special Areas.

We heard much public input on the desire to prohibit wind energy development on the Forest.

Recommendation:

We will continue with our recommendation on wind from the CER. However, we will identify areas of the Forest that are unsuitable for wind development, rather than identifying areas that are suitable. We need to talk to the Blue Ridge Parkway to determine if they see a need for plan direction in relation to the Parkway. Given the need for new energy sources, we believe that we should leave open the possibility to utilize the Forest for wind energy development and examine the site specific impacts of any proposed projects, before making a final decision.

Old Growth

CER Recommendation: C-3. Adopt the Region 8 Guideline and its ages; Remove acres of old-growth forest types 1, 2a, 2b, 2c, 5, 10, 22, 24, 28, and 37 occurring on lands suitable for timber production from suitable base. OGFT 21 and 25 on suitable acreage will not be inventoried for old-growth characteristics since acreage and patches existing and developing will be enough to meet late successional or old growth needs and no inventory or analysis will be done prior to any timber harvest project.

IDT recommends that we change this to continue to inventory all stands for old growth characteristics, in response to public concerns about protecting old growth and the concern that we have not inventoried old growth on the GW. The IDT continues to recommend that we leave the 4,800 acres of OGFT 25 (there are 8,700 total acres of OGFT 25 and 4,800 are on suitable ground) in the suitable base allowing timber harvest in these areas

Recommendation:

We will change from the CER recommendation and continue to inventory stands for old growth characteristics. We will proceed with the change to allow harvest in OGFT 25.

Special Biological Areas

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation – Natural Heritage Program identified a number of areas to add as Special Biological Areas. We have discussed these areas with them and we currently have two areas in need of further discussion. They are Peters Ridge and Frozen Knob. The DCR considers these to be significant natural communities because (according to DCR) they represent some of the best examples of old-age oak forests yet encountered in the Commonwealth. We believe that SBA's should represent rare communities or assemblages of rare species, not just a particular successional stage of a common community. The Jefferson did not use SBA's for old growth, but the Jefferson did identify old growth forests as a separate management prescription.

We need to further examine the forest condition, spatial extent and pattern in the Frozen Knob and Peters Mountain areas to determine if these resources need special management or should be included as Special Biological Areas.

Areas Suitable for Timber Production

CER Recommendation: C-1 Strive to maintain existing amount of forest generally suitable for timber production between 350,000 and 370,000 acres.

Recommendation:

There is much agreement that the Forest needs to provide a diversity of habitats for wildlife. The maintenance of the suitable timber base provides the flexibility to meet these needs. We will strive to meet the recommendation.

Salvage

Current Plan guidance only allows salvage in SBA's for safety reasons. In Backcountry Recreation areas salvage is allowed as described below by helicopter within ½ mile of perimeter roads. The former roadless rule did not allow salvage in inventoried roadless areas.

CER Recommendation: C-1. Modify the Forest Plan by revising or adding guidelines similar to the following to appropriate forest or special area direction:

- Special Biological Area (Old GW MA 4-58): Ground-based systems could be used for the salvage of dead, dying, or damaged trees along open road systems. For that part of the area not accessible by existing roads, salvage activities should only be accomplished by helicopter with no new road or landing construction.
- Scenic Corridor or Viewshed (Old GW MA 7-14): Salvage of dead, dying and damaged trees can occur to provide for scenic rehabilitation and public safety using ground based or helicopter logging.
- Remote Backcountry Area (Old GW MA 9-12): Salvage of dead, dying, or damaged trees can occur from perimeter roads using helicopter logging with no new permanent or temporary road or landing construction within the area. Salvage and firewood gathering from system interior roads can occur using ground based methods without additional road construction. Landings can be provided adjacent to existing roads.

Recommendation:

We should allow salvage in SBA's, scenic corridors, and remote backcountry areas so long as the feature that is the basis of the designation is not impaired by the salvage activities.

Ecosystem Management

We will have some further discussions with The Nature Conservancy on how our current management fits in to their vision of the areas they identified as matrix forests.

Soil productivity

We plan to add a discussion of soil productivity effects of acid deposition and acid loading. We will prepare a map overlaying areas of high deposition with areas of high sensitivity and establish a guideline that we will not use whole tree harvesting in these areas.

Dispersed Recreation – Recreation Settings

CER Recommendation: No recommendation was made.

C-1 No change. Continue to use the existing GW Plan adopted ROS classes by applying them to identified areas of the Forest.

C-2. Remove the SPM 1, SPM2, and Roaded Modified designations from the GW Plan, thereby collapse the GW ROS classes into the basic inventory classes; and provide suitable uses and associated guidelines on road construction and management by SPM and SPNM classes in the Plan.

C-3. Complete a new inventory of ROS on the GW and adopt the inventory in place of the 1993 adopted ROS classes. Incorporate into plan direction a desire that the acres of SPNM and SPM will be maintained (where it is within our management control). This could be done with a guideline on road construction or using the SP2 Class concept from the Jefferson Plan. The SP2 Class concept creates a buffer area around SPNM and SPM areas where permanent road construction is limited to protect against loss of SPNM and SPM areas.

Recommendation:

We will not have a designation of SP2. We will have a desired condition and objectives to retain SPNM, SPM and RN areas in about the levels that currently exist.

Water Quality

We plan to update the section with information on drinking water watersheds and impaired waters

Forest Pests

In response to several public comments, we recognize a need to add direction on management of non-native invasive species (NNIS). We will emphasize a need to manage non-native invasive species through the development of a Desired Condition for Forest Health. We will develop an objective for treating NNIS as well as a forest strategy for managing NNIS.